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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 001432

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SA/INS, SA/RA
LONDON FOR POL/GURNEY, NSC FOR MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/31/2013

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [NP](#) [BT](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: PLANS FOR BHUTANESE REFUGEE REPATRIATION
STILL UNCLEAR

REF: SECSTATE 215687

Classified By: DCM Robert Boggs for reasons 1.5 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary. DCM met with Madan Kumar Bhattarai, MFA Acting Secretary and Joint Secretary for South Asia, on July 31 to discuss progress toward a durable solution for the Bhutanese refugee problem in Eastern Nepal as instructed reftel. Bhattarai admitted that the Government of Nepal and Royal Government of Bhutan did not see eye-to-eye on the issue of third party involvement and that the GON looked favorably upon UNHCR participation. He did not believe many Khundunabari Camp refugees would successfully appeal their categorization, indicating that only 10-12 appeal cases were being seriously considered by the Bhutanese Joint Verification Team members. Bhattarai claimed that both Category I and II refugees would begin repatriation on September 25. However, the GON has not yet begun internal discussions on a local resettlement program, he said. Moreover, Bhattarai did not know whether the RGOB had begun making logistical arrangements for the September repatriation. Post continues to be deeply concerned that neither the RGOB or GON is truly committed to reintegrating the refugees into their local communities. End Summary.

12. (C) On July 31, DCM Robert Boggs, accompanied by PolOff, met with Madan Kumar Bhattarai, MFA Acting Secretary and Joint Secretary for South Asia, to discuss reftel points. The DCM opened the meeting by expressing concern that the practical issues involving the transportation and repatriation of refugees to Bhutan have not been adequately addressed by the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB). If the RGOB is not committed to upholding international standards for refugee resettlement, then the USG fears that refugees will choose not to return to Bhutan and instead seek resettlement in Nepal and elsewhere. Involvement of the UNHCR or other international NGOs in the verification and resettlement process would help to alleviate the refugees' uncertainties, he said. The DCM also highlighted USG concerns that the dashed aspirations of those refugees who are not guaranteed Bhutanese citizenship will create a fertile breeding ground within the camps for extremist groups from either Bhutan or Nepal.

13. (C) Bhattarai admitted that the GON and RGOB did not see eye-to-eye regarding international involvement in the verification and repatriation process. The GON recognizes that the objective of the international community is to have a positive impact on the issue, he said, and as such looks favorably upon UNHCR involvement. Bhattarai claimed that the GON also had attempted to impress on the Government of India the need for international assistance, but without success. He mentioned that Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra would be departing soon for another visit to Thimpu to discuss border security issues. He implied that he did not expect refugee repatriation to be on Mishra's agenda.

14. (C) The DCM inquired into the results of the Nepal-Bhutan Joint Verification Team's (JVT) review of the appeals submitted by 94 percent of Khundunabari Camp residents. Bhattarai replied that although July 31 was the last day for review of appeals, recommendations would not be negotiated bilaterally until the 15th Joint Ministerial, scheduled to take place in Thimpu during August 11-15. He confided that the Bhutanese JVT members were giving serious consideration to only 10-12 cases. The Nepali side, however, has reviewed far more cases than the Bhutanese, Bhattarai said, although he did not specify how many. Bhattarai stated that because the Bhutanese and Nepali JVT teams did not agree on which appeals merited a review, the two sides would likely submit differing recommendations to the August Ministerial.

15. (C) Bhattarai refuted fears by some in the international community that the RGOB plans to accept only Category I refugees (Bhutanese citizens). "Both Category I and II will go," he said. When asked about GON preparations to resettle in Nepal those refugees who choose not to repatriate to Bhutan, Bhattarai said that his government had not begun internal discussions on this issue.

16. (C) The DCM then asked whether the GON was aware if any logistical arrangements had been made to prepare for the

September 25 departure of the refugees from Khundunabari Camp. Bhattarai replied that the GON was not aware of any arrangements the RGOB might have made to receive the returning refugees, but that the GON expects the RGOB to report on its activities in this area at the August Ministerial.

17. (C) Comment. Post is concerned over the continuing lack of information on the RGOB's logistical arrangements for the repatriation of Khundunabari Camp refugees to Bhutan. These arrangements are supposed to be finalized at the August Ministerial, which begins in less than two weeks. The issue of granting some of the refugees Nepali citizenship is a political hot potato. Thousands of people of Indian extraction living in the Terai for generations are still without Nepali citizenship. Although the GON might be willing to allow some refugees to resettle locally, Post doubts the GON will seriously consider granting citizenship, leaving the refugees as stateless persons. Post will again raise this issue with MFA Secretary Acharya upon his return to Kathmandu. End Comment.
MALINOWSKI